

10-1-1921

A Study in Heads

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

"A Study in Heads." *The Palimpsest* 2 (1921), 322-327.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol2/iss10/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

A Study in Heads

In the newspapers of the decades of the thirties and forties, among the advertisements of botanic physicians, miniature painters, and grocers whose stock consisted of liquid refreshment, are frequent mention of phrenological societies, and the advertisements of phrenologists who examined human heads, charted the bumps and depressions and, with the wisdom of oracles, appraised the talents and temperaments of those who consulted them.

Their so-called science, an ancient one revived and made popular by Gall and others at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was in considerable vogue for many decades in both Europe and America. Phrenological societies were organized and phrenological journals were published. The science was based on the theory — now generally accepted — that different parts of the brain are the seats of different faculties of the mind. But those who developed the study of phrenology too often had little knowledge of anatomy or of scientific research; they went too far and claimed too much. And when the idea appealed to the popular fancy, the phrenological examination of heads became a lucrative but scarcely a scientific investigation.

Those who were credulous and many who were

merely curious allowed the phrenologist to apply his calipers to their craniums, and occasionally the skulls of dead men were measured and the results tabulated. There have been preserved the results of phrenological examinations of the heads of two of Iowa's most famous men — one red and one white — and their charts are given here, not for their historic value but because of the interest which naturally adheres to the personality of men of note. The two individuals are the Sac warrior, Black Hawk, and the United States Senator, James W. Grimes.

In a collection of pamphlets collected by Senator Grimes is an eight page leaflet bearing the title *An Explanation of the Fundamental Principles of Phrenology* and written by Frederick Bly. Pasted inside the cover is a double leaf containing on one side a "New Pictorial Phrenological Chart". The "pictorial" part is a view of the profile of a man's head transformed into a picture gallery with the location of the seats of the various functions of the mind indicated by symbolic scenes. Amativeness, represented by a fat little cupid with bow and arrow, lies at the base of the brain. Acquisitiveness, shown by a miser counting his bags of gold, is given a place above the ear, while near the top of the head firmness is rather ambiguously pictured by a mule and a man pulling in opposite directions upon the mule's halter; and beside this scene veneration is shown by a maiden in the posture of prayer.

Below the pictorial exhibit are printed in columns

the forty traits of character, with blanks opposite in which to insert the results of examinations; and here is found in numerical grades the "Phrenological Character of Jas. W. Grimes" as determined and recorded by Frederick Bly in September, 1847. On the back of the sheet is the following letter written by Bly:

Burlington Iowa Sept 18th 1847

Temperament Sanguine Nervous, Brain large size — of the three classes of organs, the intellectual predominates this combination of Phrenological developments, will give a safe, cautious, prudent character, very systematical in all his affairs, he has a quick, active, enquiring mind, fond of investigation, incredulous — he wants the why and wherefore, of all matters — memory generally good; enjoys music much; he will write better than speak, unless he has opposition. Very imaginative; at times, melancholy and gloomy, friendly and social in his manners, desirous of the good will of all; he enjoys a small circle, more than a large assembly; quite domestic; a great admirer of the opposite sex; a true friend, restless and uneasy without employment — whatever he has to do, must be done immediately impatient,— very particular and prudent

Very truly

F BLY

The head of the Indian, Black Hawk, has excited much comment. It was measured during his lifetime and his skull was studied after his death. Stevens in his volume on *The Black Hawk War* gives some interesting information from various sources

as to the phrenological character of the famous warrior. The editor of the *United States Literary Gazette* had this to say in 1838:

We found time yesterday to visit Black Hawk and the Indian chiefs at the Congress Hall Hotel. We went into their chamber, and found most of them sitting or lying on their beds. Black Hawk was sitting on a chair and apparently depressed in spirits. He is about sixty-five, of middling size, with a head that would excite the envy of a phrenologist — one of the finest that Heaven ever let fall on the shoulders of an Indian.

And the *American Phrenological Journal* which quotes the above item gives a detailed phrenological chart of Black Hawk's character. This chart is, in the following pages, combined with the chart of James W. Grimes, and with it is given the explanation from Bly's pictorial chart, which will serve to reduce adjectives and figures to a common measure.

Explanation.— The numbers extend to 20, on a scale as follows; No. 1, very small; 4, small; 7, moderate; 10, medium; 13, full; 16, large; 20, very large. The written figures denote the size of each organ.

	GRIMES	BLACK HAWK
1 Amativeness	15	large
2 Philoprogenitiveness	9	large
3 Adhesiveness	16	large
4 Inhabitiveness	7	large

		GRIMES	BLACK HAWK
5	Concentrativeness	10	large
6	Combativeness	14	very large
7	Destructiveness	9	very large
8	Alimentiveness	12	average
9	Acquisitiveness	14	large
10	Secretiveness	11	very large
11	Cautiousness	16	full
12	Approbateness	15	very large
13	Self-Esteem	6	very large
14	Firmness	13	very large
15	Conscientiousness	12	moderate
16	Hope	8	small
17	Marvellousness	3	large
18	Veneration	9	very large
19	Benevolence	13	moderate
20	Constructiveness	8	small
21	Ideality	17	moderate
22	Imitation	15	small
23	Mirthfulness	10	full
24	Individuality	17	very large
25	Form	9	very large
26	Size	8	very large
27	Weight	10	large
28	Colour	16	large
29	Order	16	large
30	Calculation	15	large
31	Locality	10	very large
32	Eventuality	12	very large
33	Time	13	uncertain
34	Tune	12	uncertain
35	Language	15	large

	GRIMES	BLACK HAWK
36 Causality	16	average
37 Comparison	11	large
B Sublimity	17	
C Suavity	15	
D An intuitive disposition to know human nature	16	

After perhaps half a century of popularity phrenology and its exponents passed into a decline, phrenological societies and journals ceased functioning, and the practitioners folded up their calipers and pictorial charts and sought other fields.

While we read with curiosity the estimates of Black Hawk's cranium we are apt to judge his character more by the words and deeds of his strenuous career. And though we can find much of interest in a phrenological estimate of Grimes in the years of his young manhood, when he was as yet only a promising lawyer of Burlington, Iowa, we shall be more inclined to look down the years to 1868 when in the Senate of the United States, in the trial of Andrew Johnson, the character of James W. Grimes was subjected to the supreme test. He held to the course of his convictions in the face of the practically unanimous execration of his constituents and colleagues, but to-day the results of that test of a public man's character form one of the proud heritages of the State of Iowa.

JOHN C. PARISH